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ON THE ART OF THE THEATRE *

That the modern stage is sadly in need of reform only those financially interested in its present condition will deny. As yet no one, however, has been able to propose a remedy which will usher in a theatrical millenium. The New Theatre is no more; the Little Theatre, we might almost say, is yet to be; and the syndicate is as powerful and as wicked as ever. The most encouraging signs of progress in America are in the work of the Drama Players in Chicago and of the Drama League all over the country. The Chicago Players have just ended their season \$70,000 in debt and are criticized rather severely for what they did and did not do, but on the whole their effort is regarded as helping greatly toward the rehabilitation of the stage. The Drama League aims at encouraging good plays and by an ominous silence discouraging bad ones, so that thereby the syndicate may see that virtue is more than its own reward and that it is quite possible to establish a holy alliance between the box office and good drama. The producers of plays are to reform their products that the public already reformed and elevated by the propaganda of the League may patronize their theatres. It does not enter the theatre by the stage door to mend things behind the footlights; that is, it does not attempt to touch directly the plays or the players or even the management; it merely refuses to enter the theatre at all unless the plays presented are worth while. It is therefore quite clear that there is a strong public demand for reform and these efforts are trying to meet it.

Reforms back of the footlights have been tried at various times with varying success. One of the most prominent of the reformers is Edward Gordon Craig, the son of Ellen Terry, who has been brought to the attention of the public in several ways and now with a goodly flourish of trumpets by his book *On the Art of the Theatre*. When the advance notices proclaim a book as a work of genius, one is inclined to treat it with the

* *On the Art of the Theatre*, by Edward Gordon Craig. Browne's Bookstore, Chicago. \$2.00.

traditional indifference accorded works of genius. There is, however, much in Mr. Craig's book that will attract attention and, it is to be hoped, lead to practical experiment on the basis of his suggestions.

The first essential in the better theatre, Mr. Craig holds, is a reformed stage-manager or director. This functionary must cease to be the distressed individual whose independence is merely titular and whose responsibilities cover a multitude of duties with which he is all too unfamiliar. He is to be a development from the actor, trained somewhat after the method of the Constan Theatre in the north of Russia. This theatre is not merely a stage for the presentation of plays, but a trained school of actors and managers, the latter being the higher product. It is open day and night almost all the year through, and rehearsals are constantly witnessed by eager students, who are consumed by a passionate love of the theatre. There is a "standing" company of about one hundred, consisting of two directors, about a dozen leading actors and actresses (each better than the greatest actor in Europe), about twenty-four persons for secondary parts, and the young students, men and women from the universities, who have gone through a probationary period of a year or so before they are admitted as regular students. The stage-directors are put through a rigid examination to show their acquaintance with all the departments of the theatre,—acting, costuming, lighting, scene-painting, etc.,—before they are allowed to qualify. The stage-director is, therefore, a man who has worked his way up through all the activities of the theatre and is able to do the work of any individual under him. The same care for ideals as against immediate profits is seen in the fact that this theatre ran for ten years before it was able to declare a dividend and that it had five artists on its board of directors out of the total seven. Such, moreover, was the confidence of the public in its endeavors that not only did the original shareholders who financed the company remain but more were added. The best plays were presented before full houses, but till the utmost was done in every detail of staging, the directors and the shareholders were content to have the expenses exceed the income. To-day the theatre has a reputation which extends over Russia. The

ambition of every Russian actor, moreover, is to secure a place in the company.

Now, it is such a theatre Mr. Craig would establish in England,—a theatre-college for the training of actors and managers. He would have two theatres, one open-air, the other roofed in. All theories would be treated and recorded by phonograph, kinematograph, or gramophone, or by special instruments to be devised for the purpose. The theatre would be fully equipped with a library, a printing-press, tools, and the like. There would be thirty men in this college to study every part of theatrical presentation and constitute a sort of faculty for the training of actors and actresses. The practical results to the state Mr. Craig enumerates as follows:—

“(1) A practical demonstration of the best method to be employed for building and directing a national theatre as an ideal theatre, and in a manner hitherto deemed impossible. (2) The improvement by simplification of many of the mechanical appliances of the modern stage. (3) The training of stage-managers and of the staff employed to shift the scenery. (4) The training of actors to speak and to move—the chief difficulties of the modern actor. (5) The training of a group of original scene-painters, a group of perfectly drilled men to execute any given order regarding the lights on the stage,—for at present, as any visit to a special light rehearsal will show, the lighting staff in a theatre is always at sea.”

This is highly reasonable and devoutly to be wished. And it is interesting to see in the New York press that Mr. Belasco is devising just such a scheme for the reform of the actor's craft by serious study and broad and intelligent education. No one here is perhaps better qualified than Mr. Belasco for managing such a college, and all friends of the theatre must wish him success in his undertaking. Mr. Craig would spend \$5,000 a year; Mr. Belasco expects his college will cost him from \$10,000 to \$15,000 a year. It is cheap at either price.

When he comes to details, Mr. Craig has interesting theories,—some plausible, others not. Thus he holds that scenery should be symbolic rather than real, that instead of endeavoring, for instance, to reproduce actual scenery in *Macbeth* he would

substitute a high rock with mist enveloping its head, "a place for fierce and warlike men to inhabit, a place for phantoms to rest in." The rock is brown, the mist gray. For the "interiors" walls hewn from the same rock would be used. Thus a sense of unity would be preserved throughout by means of the scenery. "Actuality, accuracy of detail, is useless upon the stage." "This is refreshing after the photographic exactness in scenery reproducing the very place in which the play was laid at the very minute when the events presented took place; not to mention the relief from the "sensations" of real water, or a highly realistic snow storm. Mr. Craig prefers suggestion with an eye to the play and the action, no mere actuality of location or time, which to a certain extent obscures the action. He would have the scenery lost in the tone or spirit of the play like the costume of a beautiful woman in the prevailing impression of her loveliness.

Similarly, costume is symbolic, not something modelled from the contemporary fashion books. It must be imaginative, with the idea that the costume betrays the man. Thus he says:—"For example, make a barbaric costume; and a barbaric costume for a sly man which has nothing about it which can be said to be historical, and yet is both sly and barbaric. Now make another design for another barbaric costume, for a man who is bold and tender. Now a third for one who is ugly and vindictive. It will be an exercise." Far be it from a mere layman to say it will not. Possibly a key might be furnished with the programmes, and the audience would know at once the heavy villain from the dashing hero, the false deceiver from the sweet *ingénue*, and he would be spared a racking of nerves lest the noble young man should turn out to be but a well-disguised scoundrel, or the tempted soul should fall into the jaws of ruin. The costume would tell all. But even the uninitiated layman can see the good sense in designing costume for a crowd as for a crowd and not for a collection of individuals. The crowd is to be costumed as a composite whole and not with reference to a lot of separate persons.

So far and for the most part so good. The stage is a convention and not real life, and to introduce crass realism into the

performance of a play is as inappropriate as to use the unselected speech of the street for dialogue. Artificiality may under certain circumstances be a higher form of art than naturalness. But when Mr. Craig goes farther and treats the actor also as a bit of symbolism, we must let him go alone. Acting, he says, is not an art, and the actor is not an artist. "For accident is an enemy of the artist. Art is the exact antithesis of pandemonium, and pandemonium is created by the tumbling together of many accidents. Art arrives only by design, therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of these materials." For the actor's mind is never able to control his emotions, and as a consequence his body and all its movements are at the mercy of these uncontrolled emotions; hence accidents are continually occurring. One may be willing to admit that no actor has ever performed a play perfectly, and more than willing to admit that many perform it abominably; but so one might contend that there is no absolutely perfect work of art in any department of æsthetics. Its very perfection would be a fault like the pictures of Browning's "faultless painter." But this admission does not mean that an imperfect performance is necessarily not a work of art. Booth in *Hamlet*, it is said, would follow the same line of movement night after night without varying an inch, and no one can say that he showed any lack of feeling or that his body was the mere prey of his emotions. And music, which is to Mr. Craig the art of arts, is subject to the same limitations in that the human body must be controlled to call out music from the instrument. The difference is one of degree, not of kind.

Since now the actor, according to Mr. Craig, is not an artist, the only thing to do is to get rid of him and in his place to put the über-marionette. This is a glorified puppet with beautiful symbolic movements, grave grace, and infinite subtlety of eye, such as is told of by "the old Greek traveller of 800 B.C.," whoever he may be. This puppet becomes the spirit, the symbol of motion, and all that goes with the uttered word has vanished! But how can movement make up for utterance, seeing for hearing *and* seeing? Even if more perfect movement were gained by

the marionette, it would not satisfy the desire for the flash of dialogue, the play of emotion, the electric contact of soul with soul through the touch of living personalities. How, too, could the marionette be made to fit into the presentation of a play of involved structure and conflicting passions? The moving-picture show might as well attempt to displace the spoken drama. Mr. Craig had better leave the über-marionettes of remote Egyptian antiquity undisturbed in their silent temples. He is here pushing the classical idea of art to absurd limits. Severe repression of emotion may become as repellent to high art as emotional excess. Art does not cease with the preponderance of the intellectual or of the emotional. The Augustan age and the romantic revival are both in the province of literary art.

One cannot always accept Mr. Craig's statements of alleged fact. Thus on what authority does he say that "In the beginning the human body was not used as material in the Art of the Theatre. . . . An elephant and a tiger in an arena suited the taste better." When was the "beginning"? One is irritated, too, by the occasional vagueness of Mr. Craig's references, as on page 93, where he says "it is on record," and not knowing we cannot tell. Moreover, so often does he abuse the other side that the reader instinctively wishes to take a brief for the defence. One would suppose, for instance, that the actor always tore his passions to tatters, and that sanity and conscientious work on the part of the actor were something unknown,—that is, while Mr. Craig is driving home his point about the actor not being an artist. But notwithstanding these faults the book is well worth while, and as long as Mr. Craig keeps his feet on the ground and does not try to construct castles among the clouds, he delivers a message we cannot afford to neglect. His theatre-college is an ideal we should wish to see realized, but his über-marionettes in their vacuous placidity of countenance are no better material for dramatic presentation than their degenerate descendants of the Punch and Judy show.

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